



# United States Department of the Interior

## U. S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

7915 BAYMEADOWS WAY, SUITE 200  
JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA 32256-7517

IN REPLY REFER TO:

FWS Log No. 04EF1000-2017-I-0075

December 20, 2016

Carl Bauer  
District Ranger, Ocala National Forest  
U. S. Forest Service  
17147 East Highway 40  
Silver Springs, FL 34488

Dear Mr. Bauer:

Our office has reviewed the correspondence provided in the *Biological Assessment for the North 40 Scrub Project* for proposed activities to create over 12,000 acres of scrub openings on Ocala National Forest (ONF) in Marion County, Florida. The proposed activities will occur in designated Management Area 8.2 locations and includes timber management (harvest of crooked wood and sand pine), habitat management (roller-chopping, prescribed burning, sand pine and longleaf pine seeding), and road maintenance activities. The proposed action is consistent with Forest Service's Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) for ONF.

The Fish and Wildlife Service submits the following comments in accordance with section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (Act) of 1973, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*).

### ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

The federally-listed species identified in the materials submitted include: Florida Scrub-Jay (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*), Eastern Indigo Snake (*Drymarchon couperi*), [=*Drymarchon corais couperi*], Sand Skink (*Plestiodon reynoldsi*) [=*Neoseps reynoldsi*], Florida Bonamia (*Bonamia grandiflora*), Scrub Wild Buckwheat (*Eriogonum longifolium* var. *gnaphalifolium*), Lewton's Polygala (*Polygala lewtonii*), and Pigeon Wings (*Clitoria fragrans*). The Forest Service determined the proposed action may affect, is likely to adversely affect the above noted species.


The Fish and Wildlife Service issued a biological opinion in December of 1998 (FWS Log #98-891) in order for the Forest Service to be exempt from section 9 prohibitions of the Act while implementing activities for the LRMP. This plan guided the management direction on the ONF over the ensuing years. A second biological opinion was issued in June 2016 (FWS Log# 04EF 1000-2016-F-0215) to address a proposed revision to the LRMP regarding the transfer of roughly 50,000 acres of Management Area 8.2 to Management Area 8.4 (Amendment # 12). This amendment is currently in the approval process. Should this amendment not receive final approval, the areas identified will continue to be managed under their original designation.

The activities described in the correspondence will not exceed the level of take authorized in the previously issued biological opinions. The Forest Service also included General Measures, Timber Production Measures, Wildlife Protection Measures, and Project-Specific Criteria to further increase the avoidance and minimization of the proposed activities potential negative effects on listed species. Implementation of the proposed action will result in a net conservation benefit to the Florida Scrub-Jay, Eastern Indigo Snake, Sand Skink, and the aforementioned listed plants.

An additional species, the Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) was included in the analysis even though it is no longer federally-listed under the Act to communicate compliance with the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. Four nests are within the 660-foot activity buffer. The Forest Service stated that they will adhere to the National Bald Eagle Management Guidelines while implementing the proposed activities.

The Fish and Wildlife Service fully endorses the proposed activities and increasing the acreage of Management Area 8.4 ultimately benefiting the scrub habitat of ONF. We look forward to working with you and your staff in implementing the revised Land and Resource Management Plan. If you have any questions regarding this response, please contact Mr. Todd Mecklenborg at (727) 892-4104.

Sincerely,

  
for Jay B. Herrington  
Field Supervisor